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## Theater: *Once* Conquers Broadway; *Salesman* Can't Quite Deliver the Goods

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*ONCE* \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
*DEATH OF A SALESMAN* \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
*ONCE* \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**BERNARD B. JACOBS THEATRE**

Whew! Heave a huge sigh of relief as the best musical of 2011 has transferred beautifully with its charm and intimacy intact. If anything, the show has improved. Next stop -- the Tony Awards, where even road producers will have to acknowledge the broad appeal of

this quietly powerful show.

You may know the story from the Oscar-winning film or the acclaimed Off Broadway production which has transferred to the Great White Way in a blink of an eye. Guy (Steve Kazee) is despondent over the one that got away when he meets Girl (Cristin Milioti). They have immediate chemistry and a shared love of music, but this is a story of friendship and song, not a story of simple romance. They do fall in love, in a way, but the Czech Girl has other ideas than moving on from the husband that has left her in Ireland with a small child to raise. She knows that Guy's music must be heard and that he has unfinished business with the woman that inspired his heartbreakingly good songs. So Girl snaps Guy out of his doldrums, somehow raises the money to record a demo and sends him out into the world. He is "stopped," she tells her mother, and she's going to give it a jolt and get him moving again.

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That essentially is it. But what a wonderful thing this exquisitely directed show creates from such modest material. Almost every element of the original production is the same (you can read my rave review [here](#) and every single word of praise still holds true). But the two stars are even more confident and precise in their performances. Plus the humor of the piece works better in a larger house where the laughs can build. I believe Paul Whitty has modestly toned down the buffoonish nature of the music shop owner Billy; but in any case his clowning and Girl's pointed one liners ("I'm always serious. I'm Czech.") simply work better now.

The big fear was that the intimacy that is so key to this show would be lost on Broadway. In fact, the intimacy is even more pronounced. Has there ever been a musical where the audience was reluctant to clap because they didn't want to spoil the spell the cast was creating? That's what happens here. In this day and age of cell phones and jabbering and candy eating, it's a genuine thrill to hear an entire Broadway house absolutely hushed and focused on the action onstage. Sometimes it happens with key scenes in a great play. But for an entire show? That makes the roar of applause at the end all the more ecstatic.

Playwright Enda Walsh has done a masterful job of re-imagining a rather slight film, pulling out what works about it (essentially a shared love of creating music) and transforming that into theatrical terms. Every tech element is ideal. Bob Crowley's costumes and set (the stage is filled with a semi-circular bar and the walls are filled with faded mirrors and lights that lend the show a warmth and sense of place) couldn't be bettered. The same is true for the marvelous lighting by Natasha Katz and sound design by Clive Goodwin, which work together to enable that intimacy. When the show begins with Guy doing a number, obviously the song by Glen Hansard & Marketa Irglova and the performance by Kazee are front and center. But it's the lighting and sound and set and costumes and every other element that support that performance and allow it to end so movingly and yet with the audience somehow knowing they shouldn't applaud, and simply watching what happens next in complete and utter stillness.

I think the dance moment for the Girl when she's listening to the Guy's music on headphones has also been tweaked. Or maybe I was just ready for it. In either case, this modest moment when the show broke out of the natural style it had maintained bothered me less. (In general, the movement by Steven Hoggett is marvelous.) The same is true of the band members infighting that felt like filler like the first time around. Since those were the only modest complaints I had the first time around, it seemed worth mentioning that they're still there, but because the actors have settled into their roles or the dialogue has been tweaked, it all works a little better.

And what seamless direction by John Tiffany. The transitions from scene to scene are simply marvelous, with each moment flowing into the next. The actors stay on stage for much of the show, sitting in chairs along the sides of the bar, watching and joining in with the making of music. That sense of community, that shared love of creating is at the heart of *Once*. When we watch two people start to sing a duet for the first time and know they're creating something genuinely lovely and special, it's heart-stopping. When our hero is performing at an open mike night and the audience slowly stand up one by one with their instruments and join in, it's as moving and enthralling a spectacle as any big budget spectacle could ever hope to achieve.

Some people saw the movie over and over again. You can bet the same thing will happen here. On Broadway, quiet is the new loud thanks to this gentle, bittersweet, romantic and lovely musical.

NOTE: A friend who bought a ticket to the same show wanted to buy the cast album on the way out. Twenty five dollars? That's too much money for a new album by the Beatles! When you go to a rock concert, it's always great to buy a CD at the show because you know the artist is going to keep a much bigger chunk of the proceeds. I'd love to encourage people to do the same thing here, but \$25 is absurdly over-priced. Imagine how many they'd sell if the CDs were \$10 and employees stood at the exit with stacks of them.

**[DEATH OF A SALESMAN](#)** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**[ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE](#)**

When you're tackling a towering masterwork like Arthur Miller's *Death Of A Salesman*, words like "respectable" and "solid" seem like faint praise. When you hope to scale the mountaintop, getting most of



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the way up is cold comfort.

But that's the case for this generally well-acted production by director Mike Nichols that presents the famous drama but never quite gets under your skin.

Philip Seymour Hoffman stars as the hapless salesman Willy Loman. All great works are timeless but it's certainly easy to see how little things have changed: Willy worked for 36 years for his company, but now that he's not producing as much, they've cut his salary completely and put him back on commission, just like a kid starting out. There's loyalty for you.

Willy is easily confused these days and more grumpy than garrulous with customers. His hopes and dreams used to reside in Willy's sons, golden boy Biff (Andrew Garfield) and Happy (Finn Wittrock). But Biff has returned home penniless after floundering out west and Hap is a glorified sales clerk who hits on woman after woman in a desperate attempt to prove himself. Willy has one more hope for the future: maybe Biff can make something of the absurd idea that he can raise money to start a company from the businessman he ripped off years ago in a petty theft. or there's always the life insurance policy: Willy slowly realizes he's worth more dead than alive. And since he's never felt that alive, the idea of suicide isn't hard to swallow.

Some have suggested Hoffman is miscast as Willy, but I've no idea what they're talking about. Hoffman easily embodies a shambles of a man like Willy and always has. He might have been better advised to wait another ten years (Hoffman is only 44) but essentially he seems right in the role. And unlike his throat-shredding work in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, here Hoffman is more modulated and subtle. When he finally breaks out that animal roar of his, it's more effective. The high points of the show are almost all his, like the moment when he's asked how work is going and Willy collapses within himself.

Andrew Garfield (star of the upcoming film *The Amazing Spiderman*) is a terrific film actor and proves himself on stage, as well. His accent is convincing enough not to draw attention to itself and he too seems well cast as a golden boy who listened too often to a dad who promised him everything would come easy to a kid that people liked. Garfield specializes in a jangly nervousness well-suited to Biff and he's good here. Linda Emond may not completely nail Willy's wife Linda, but she too has her solid moments.

The supporting work is even better. Wittrock is excellent as Hap, Fran Kranz is strong as the geeky Bernard (a kid who blossoms into a powerful lawyer) and Bill Camp is marvelous as Charley, the neighbor who is always there to lend a helping hand. Willy treats Charley with disdain but Camp somehow shows us that Charley knows Willy really despises himself, and makes the patience and friendliness Charley shows understandable. In the tricky role of Willy's brother Ben, John Glover brings a little too much flash, but that's probably the director's fault.

With a generally solid cast, why doesn't the show catch fire more? First, the scenic design by Jo Mielziner is ugly. It's dominated by the Loman home, which contains one bedroom plopped here and another plopped there and an odd curtained exit in the middle of the kitchen people are forever wandering in and out of towards the parents' bedroom or offstage. Who has a curtained doorway in the middle of their kitchen? It's all poorly thought out and deeply unhelpful in capturing the family dynamics. In a show with such powerful entrances and exits, sweeping aside a nondescript grey curtain just doesn't cut it.

Watching it anew, one is struck by how ambitious and bold *Salesman* is, with its constant shifts in time and place and the mix of the real and the imaginary. Director Mike Nichols keeps us firmly grounded throughout (we're never confused about what's going on). But he never lights a fire under the show. He's got a strong cast but didn't pull the work out of them or the technical team to justify why they had to revive this show at this time. Employees being set adrift by their companies? This *Salesman* could speak to today like it never has before. But Nichols can't close the deal.

**The Theater Season 2011-2012** (on a four-star scale)

[The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs](#) \*\* 1/2

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*Early Plays* (Eugene O'Neill at St. Ann's Warehouse) \*  
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*Once* \*\*\* 1/2  
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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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**Fern Siegel: Stage Door: *Death of a Salesman***

Now at the Barrymore, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman as Willy and Andrew Garfield as his lost son Biff, this soulful lament of missed dreams and misguided desires is staged with aching sensitivity by Mike Nichols.

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